

# TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

**Maggie Tonkin, *Angela Carter and Decadence: Critical Fictions/Fictional Critiques* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).**

Angela Carter appears to the reader in different guises: feminist, fabulist, postmodernist, surrealist. An exceptionally talented late-twentieth-century author, she wrote in many forms: essays as well as film scripts, novels as well as short stories. She is best known for her strikingly original fiction with its baroque prose and bizarre characters: novels such as *The Magic Toyshop* (1967), *Nights at the Circus* (1984) and *The Passion of New Eve* (1977).

Maggie Tonkin focuses her scholarly study of Angela Carter's work on 'her project of revealing the insidious effects that patriarchal myths of femininity continue to exert in our culture' (24). She argues, as Carter herself did, that the fiction is 'a kind of elaborate form of literary criticism', where the use of intertextuality and irony draw the reader's attention to the flaws of the myths that she is examining. With Carter, we are reading more than a story; we are reading critical fictions/fictional critiques.

Woman-as-doll, woman as muse and woman as *femme fatale* are the primary 'disabling images of femininity' (27) that Carter attacks. Maggie Tonkin traces the development of this argument from the early work, *The Magic Toyshop*, through to *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*, 'The Cabinet of Edgar Allan Poe', 'Black Venus', *The Sadeian Woman* and *The Passion of New Eve*. She pays particular attention to the intertextuality in the fiction, covering a range of influences such as Hoffmann's 'The Sandman', Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu*, the Marquis de Sade's *Justine* and the tales of Edgar Allan Poe.

It is this breadth of reference that makes Maggie Tonkin's study of Carter's work such a pleasure to read. Angela Carter's fictional arguments are much richer than some critics have contended – Tonkin particularly cites feminists who have objected to the fetishistic detail and 'pornographic objectification of women' that Carter's lush prose embodies. Beneath this elaborate surface is the real argument that Carter is making: her 'citation of this misogynistic cultural mode opens up a space in which it can be critiqued' (5). It is the intertextuality that enriches the critique, and Maggie Tonkin's wide-ranging scholarly knowledge of these *other* texts is vital to her study.

An example of this is the 'woman-as-muse' trope, the subject of the middle chapters of *Angela Carter and Decadence*. Tonkin discusses the history of the muse from Classical times to the nineteenth century, emphasising the social context as well as the literary one. Her knowledge of French writers such as Proust and Baudelaire is significant here, as is her work on Edgar Allan Poe and the development of the 'muse-as-beloved' to the 'muse-as-dead-beloved' paradigm. (Think of Poe's famous claim that 'the death, then, of a beautiful woman, is unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world',<sup>1</sup>

as well as some of the vampiric female figures in his *Tales of the Arabesque and Grottesque*.)

Similarly, Maggie Tonkin's chapters on the *femme fatale* characters in Carter's work are enriched by her thoughtful consideration of different aspects of this 'iconic representation of femininity in Decadent art' and literature: Keats' Belle Dame Sans Merci, Baudelaire's

<sup>1</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, 'The Philosophy of Composition,' Criticism, University of Adelaide Library eBooks@Adelaide, 2008, 8 Aug. 2012 [http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/p/poe/edgar\\_allan/p74e/](http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/p/poe/edgar_allan/p74e/)

Book reviews: *Angela Carter and Decadence: Critical Fictions/Fictional Critiques* by Maggie Tonkin. Jennifer Osborn.

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black Venus, Pre-Raphaelite paintings of Lilith. Tonkin also briefly introduces ideas about *film noir*, that hotbed of *femmes fatales* from Cora to Gilda, Lana Turner to Rita Hayworth. Again, her work on the multiple points of reference in Carter's fiction gives the reader plenty of material to think about.

I wouldn't usually comment on the *cover* of a book in a review, but in this particular case I am willingly making an exception. It shows an automaton by Paul Spooner from the Cabaret Mechanical Theatre:<sup>2</sup> 'Manet's Olympia', a mechanical, wooden doll lying prone on a bench, with the figure of Anubis hovering over her. This sinister image of Woman-as-doll immediately conjures up Tonkin's *Magic Toyshop* chapter ('Olympia's Revenge'), with its references to Hoffmann's 'living doll' in 'The Sandman.' Then there are the links to Swanhilda, the puppet-doll in the ballet *Coppelia* and to Villiers' 'sublime android' Hadaly (32). Manet's Olympia is itself referencing classical mythology and earlier art on the same subject – it's like a series of wheels within wheels. The multiple allusions inside the book are played out clearly on the cover.

*Angela Carter and Decadence* had its genesis in a doctoral thesis from the University of Adelaide, and in a scholarly essay published in the edited collection *Revisiting Angela Carter* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2006). I wouldn't hesitate to recommend Maggie Tonkin's work to readers interested in gaining a deeper understanding of Angela Carter's key texts from a feminist perspective, or to those seeking further insight into the work of Proust, Baudelaire and Edgar Allan Poe. Students intrigued by the concept of intertextuality would also benefit from this study. *Angela Carter and Decadence* is complex and challenging literary criticism; it rewards the reader with valuable perspectives on Carter's fiction, canonical nineteenth-century authors and the current state of feminist literary criticism.

**Jennifer Osborn**

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.cabaret.co.uk/>